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Article

Does Political Representation Ensure Empowerment? Scheduled Tribes in Decentralised Local Governments of India

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Abstract

The article examines the process of political inclusion through representation and its promises and potentials for empowerment of Scheduled Tribes in decentralised governance in India. It perceives political representation as a process, and tries to explore the potentials of such political representation to include and empower the Scheduled Tribes in matters of decentralised governance. Based on a theoretical review of the concept of representation, the article examines the substantive and descriptive representation of Scheduled Tribes in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The article concludes that political representation, manifested through participation of representatives in PRIs may form necessary conditions to bring Scheduled Tribes into institutions of decision-making, but are not sufficient to empower them, especially in the absence of supportive and enabling institutional arrangements.

Keywords

Representation, empowerment, participation, Scheduled Tribes, panchayats

Introduction

Possibilities of achieving social justice, equity and empowerment of the marginalised in a world subject to chronic and apparently irresistible forces of inequality, exploitation and marginalisation are central to the contemporary efforts towards democratic decentralisation. Consequently, national governments in the developing world have reconsidered their projects of democratic governance, and have

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brought up political reforms, favouring increased inclusion, participation and empowerment. Democratic decentralisation, therefore, has emerged as the process of reforming the existing democratic governance systems, which promises devolution of power to the people and a more accountable form of government. This ongoing process of political reform has made it clear that democracy, by itself, does not automatically benefit the poor, the under-privileged, the disadvantaged and weaker sections of society—and/or the groups, which have long faced social, economic and political exclusion. A growing understanding of these problems of exclusion, powerlessness and marginalisation calls for immediate action to address them in a right way. Policy makers, academicians, researchers and development practitioners alike have realised that poor and other excluded sections of society like Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women have great developmental needs, but their needs by itself do not imply the awareness and the ability to take collective action in an increasingly democratised system. Democratisation with progressive inclusion of the hitherto excluded sections of society through decentralisation reforms and affirmative action, therefore, has emerged as a new governance paradigm to address the limitations of liberal representative democracy.

Recognising the need for greater democratisation and progressive inclusion, many governments carried out political reforms ensuring decentralisation to promote empowerment and inclusion. In its attempts for democratisation, the Indian state enacted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993, making provisions for devolution of power to the local levels, and gave a constitutional status to the panchayats. The new decentralisation efforts were coupled with inclusive policies of reservation of seats for weaker sections such as Scheduled Castes, STs and women. This opened a new chapter in the history of democratic decentralisation in India, which gave an opportunity to the hitherto excluded categories such as STs to raise their voice, and in turn, include themselves in making of decisions that affect their lives.

In the backdrop of above discussion, the present article focuses on the issues of political inclusion of STs through representation and its implications on their empowerment in the context of democratic local governments of India, which after the 73rd Amendment Acts are being termed as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It perceives political inclusion through representation as a process and tries to explore the potentials of such political representation to include and empower the STs in matters of decentralised governance. The broad objective of the article is to examine the process of political inclusion through representation and its promises and potentials for empowerment of STs in decentralised governance. The empirical work for the article has been carried out in the Dhenkanal district of the state of Orissa in India.

The article is divided into five sections. Following the introduction, which poses the background for the article, the second section lays down the contextual background of the study by means of providing an account of current status of ST population in India as well as in the state of Orissa, and highlighting the main

features of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in the context of democratic local governments. The third section engages itself with a theoretical discussion on political inclusion, representation and empowerment. The fourth section empirically examines the concept of representation and tribal self-governance and examines the process of inclusion and empowerment of STs in decentralised governance. The fifth section discusses the empirical findings and concludes the article by way of explaining the manifestation of inclusion/exclusion and empowerment/disempowerment of STs in the panchayats of Orissa.

Contextual Background

The present study is based in the context of 73rd Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which not only gave a constitutional status to democratic local governments in the country but also made progressive legislations to ensure inclusion of marginalised communities like the STs into the PRIs through affirmative action policies. It is, therefore, apt to engage with a discussion regarding the current status of STs in India as well as in the state of Orissa, which will help in laying down the rationale for choosing ST representation in PRIs as the main focus of the study. Besides, a brief explanation of the main features of PRIs in the context of 73rd Amendment is also done to provide background information for the study.

Current Status of ST Population in India

The term 'Scheduled Tribe' denotes a constitutional and legal category, which is closely linked with administrative and political considerations. As a politico-administrative category, the term is of recent origin, which emerged along with the birth of the republican Constitution of India on 26 January 1950. Prior to independence, the tribal communities were identified by the colonial administrators in various names, though in many occasions caste and tribe were used synonymously. Perhaps the Census officials of colonial India were clearer with regard to defining the tribal communities and distinguishing it from caste. It was with 1901 Census, that tribal communities were identified as those who practised animism, and in the subsequent censuses, animism was replaced by tribal religion (Xaxa 1999). Verma (1990) mentions several census reports of colonial India referred to tribal communities in different names, such as 'Animists' (Census Report, 1901), 'Tribal Animists' or 'People following Tribal Religion' (Census Report, 1911), 'Hill and Forest Tribes' (Census Report, 1921), 'Primitive Tribes' (Census Report, 1931), 'Backward Tribes' (Government of India Act, 1935), and 'Tribes' (Census Report, 1941). There was also a discussion about the terminology in the Constituent Assembly Debates during the process of framing of the Indian Constitution. While some of the tribal representatives in the Assembly favoured the use of the term

'*Adivasi*', literally meaning 'the original inhabitants', the term ST was accepted by the framers of the Indian Constitution, with the justification that 'the term *Adivasi* is a general term, which has no specific legal *de jure* connotation, whereas "Scheduled Tribe" has a fixed meaning because it enumerates the tribes' (Saksena 1981, cited in Ambagudia 2011: 34). Since then, the term ST is being used mainly as a mark of identification and differentiation, that is to identify a group of people, who are distinct in terms of geographical isolation, simple technology and conditions of living, general backwardness and practice of animism, physical features, tribal language, custom, social organisation and so on (Xaxa 1999).

Demographic Profile of STs

According to the 2001 Census of India, the ST population was 84.3 million, accounting for 8.2 per cent of India's total population. In the three previous censuses, that is, in 1991, 1981 and 1971, their share to the total population was 8.08, 7.85 and 6.94 per cent, respectively. Since the question of being enumerated as ST is a politico-administrative consideration, there has been increasing demand by groups and communities for their inclusion in the list of STs of the Indian Constitution, which partly explains the steady increase in the proportion of their population. The ST population is unevenly distributed in several states of India, except for Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and the union territories of Pondicherry and Chandigarh. Despite the disperse nature of their spread, one may identify two major tribal concentrations in India. One tribal concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas, stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the north-west to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland in the north-east of India. Another concentration lives in the hills of central Indian states covering Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh, which accounts to 75 per cent of the total tribal population of India. The STs are drawn from 701 types of tribal communities, which has increased over years from 212 in 1950, 314 in 1967 and 427 in 1981. The largest numbers of STs are in the state of Orissa, where they are 62 in number.

Constitutional Safeguards for STs

In its efforts to ensure social justice and promote social welfare, as well as recognising the overall backwardness of tribal communities, the Constitution of India made certain special provisions to safeguard their interests and to protect these communities from all the possible sources of exploitation. Part III of the Indian Constitution, under the section of Fundamental Rights, extends certain inalienable rights to all the Indian citizens, which are also extended to STs with certain special provision. In this section, while Article 14 confers equal rights to all, Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste, etc.; Article 15(4) enjoins upon the State to make special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes including the STs. Further, while Article 16 provides equality of opportunity in matters of public

employment to all citizens of India, Article 16(4) empowers the State to make provisions for reservation in appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens including STs, which in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State. Part IV of the Indian Constitution, under the Directive Principles of State Policy also provides certain provisions, which are fundamental in overall governance of tribal affairs. In this section, Article 46 enjoins upon the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, the STs and promises to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. With respect to tribal administration, the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution lays down certain prescriptions about the Scheduled Areas by ensuring submission of Annual Reports by the Governors to the President of India regarding the Administration of the Scheduled Areas and setting up of Tribal Advisory Councils to advise on matters pertaining to the welfare and advancement of the STs (Article 244(1)). Likewise, the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution also refers to the administration of Tribal Areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram by designating certain tribal areas as Autonomous Districts and Autonomous Regions and also by constituting District Councils and Regional Councils (Article 244 (2)) (Government of India 2002).

Further, to ensure effective political participation of the tribes, Articles 330, 332 and 335 stipulate reservation of seats for STs in the Indian Parliament and in the State Legislative Assemblies. Likewise, to ensure effective participation of STs in the process of planning and decision-making in Local Governance institutions, the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution are being extended to the Scheduled Areas through the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. Finally, the Constitution also empowers the State to appoint a Commission to investigate the conditions of the socially and educationally backward classes (Article 340) and to specify those Tribes or Tribal Communities deemed to be as STs (Article 342).

ST Situation in the State of Orissa

Out of the 701 tribal communities, which are enumerated as STs, 62 communities live in the state of Orissa, which is the highest for any state in the country. As per 2001 Census, the ST population of the State of Orissa is 8,145,081, which constitutes 22.1 percent of the total population of the State and 9.7 per cent of the total tribal population of the country. The state holds 3rd and 11th rank in terms of total ST population and the proportion of ST population to total population of the state, respectively (Census of India 2001). Out of the total 62 tribal communities found in the state of Orissa, *Kondh, Gond, Santal, Kolha, Munda, Saora, Shabar* and *Bhottada* are the most numerous tribal communities, which together constitute 64.2 per cent of the total ST population of the State. Amongst these, Kondh and Gond are the most populous tribe, constituting 17.1 and 9.6 per cent of the total ST population of the state. The overall sex ratio of the ST population in the state of Orissa favours female population with 1003 females for every 1,000 males, in

contradiction to 978, which is the national average sex ratio of STs in India (Census of India 2001).

The overall literacy rate of the STs in the state of Orissa is 37.4 per cent as per the 2001 Census, which was estimated as 22.3 per cent in 1991. Despite this improvement, the literacy rate among the tribes is considerably below the national average, which is 47.1 per cent. The male and female literacy among the tribes in the state of Orissa has increased from 34.4 to 51.5 per cent and 10.2 to 23.4 per cent, respectively, during the years 1991–2001. The Work Participation Rate of the ST population in the state of Orissa is 49 per cent, which is equal to that of all STs at the national level (49.1 per cent). Agricultural Labourers constitute the highest proportion among the total ST workers in the state of Orissa, which is 46.9 per cent, followed by cultivators, accounting for 33.3 per cent and other workers, constituting 15 per cent (Census of India 2001). Such low human development indicators of STs, despite a sizeable presence in the state, creates a rationale to choose STs as the subject of investigation in the present context.

Main Features of PRIs in the Context of 73rd Amendment Act, 1993

A commitment to reduce poverty and ensure development has been the defining characteristics of Indian state since its independence. This process of poverty reduction and empowerment of marginalised sections of society has been associated with some form of decentralisation in the post-independent political scenario. Perhaps the most promising image of decentralisation was found in the Gandhi's vision of '*Gram Swaraj*', which envisioned the panchayats to be the grassroots democratic units that would dictate to the centre and not vice versa (Gandhi 1942). With the Gandhian notion of *Gram Swaraj* in the background, and with an intention to provide institutional structure to local governments, Indian state had appointed several commissions to give a shape to PRIs, the most important amongst them being the Balwant Rai Mehta Commission of 1957, the Asoka Mehta Commission of 1978 and the G.V.K. Rao Committee of 1985. However, all of these commissions and several others instituted for the purpose opined that panchayats have been undermined and weakened in India mainly on three counts: (1) unwillingness on the part of the states to devolve substantial power to panchayats, (2) a resistant bureaucracy and (3) the dominating power of local elites (Jha 1999). Such realisations became later instrumental in giving panchayats a Constitutional status in 1993 through the 73rd Amendment Act (see Alsop et al. 2000; Crook and Manor 1998; Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Manor 1999; Meenakshisundaram 1999; Singh et al. 2003).

Until the enactment of the 73rd Amendment, matters relating to formation and functioning of panchayats were in the Directive Principles of the State Policy of the Indian Constitution, and were, therefore, not enforceable by law. It was the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1993, which made it incumbent upon the states to set up representative rural and urban bodies, and devolve defined powers,

responsibilities and means of operation to them. This included specific instructions with respect to the structure of the institution, elections and reservation of seats to the PRIs. The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) opened a new chapter in the history of democratic decentralisation in India by devolving power to the people and giving constitutional status to PRIs. Under this Amendment, while Article 243G of the Constitution empowered the State Legislatures to endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government, the provision of reservation for Scheduled Castes, STs and women (Article 243D) gave an opportunity to the hitherto neglected sections of society to raise their voice and, in turn, be a part of the decision-making process. The main features of the 73rd Amendment Act can be summarised as below (Johnson 2003: 17; World Bank 2000: 7):

1) The establishment of a three-tier PRI structure, with elected bodies at village, block and district levels (Article 243 B)
2) The recognition that the *Gram Sabha* constitutes a deliberative body at the village level (Article 243 A)
3) Direct elections to five year terms for all members at all levels (Article 243 E)
4) Reservation of one-third of all seats for women, and reservations for SCs and STs in proportional to their populations (Article 243 D)
5) State legislatures may provide reservations for other backward groups
6) Establishment of State Finance Commission to review and revise the financial position of the *Panchayats* on five-year intervals, and to make recommendations to the State government about the distribution of *Panchayat* funds (Article 243 I).

Implementation of Panchayati Raj System in the State of Orissa

During the first decade of independence, three important legislations were passed concerning local governance in Orissa, that is, The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1948; The Orissa Local Self-Government Act, 1950 and The Orissa *Anchal Sasan* Act, 1954. Based on the recommendations given by the Balwant Rai Mehta Commission and to establish a three-tier local government structure, two new Acts were introduced in the early 1960s, that is, The Orissa Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959; and The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, and accordingly Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads were established at the Block and District level, respectively. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which the Panchayati Raj system was introduced in Orissa in early 1960s, it became weak in the subsequent years owing to several factors including entry of party politics, lack of political commitment and abolition of Zilla Parishad in the year 1968 (Rao 1977; Samal and Bhargava 1999). However, attempts towards local government saw a new lease of life with the second wave of decentralisation in the early 1990s with the initiatives taken by the then Chief Minister Mr Biju Patnaik, who was

instrumental in passing three new Acts, such as The Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1991; The Orissa Panchayat Samiti (Amendment) Act, 1991 and The Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991.

In a sharp departure from the old Acts of 1959 and 1964, the amended Acts of 1991 made elaborate provisions for the reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes, STs and Backward Class Citizens (BCCs) in the panchayats at all levels, and on the basis of their population. The three Acts of 1991 also made arrangements for the reservation of one-third of the seats for women (including those belonging to SC/ST/BCC groups) in the PRIs at all levels on a rotation basis. In its efforts towards the empowerment of women through affirmative action, the Orissa government even went a few steps ahead of provisions in the 73rd Amendment Act, which also made provisions for reservation of one-third of seats at all tiers of PRIs, by reserving the post of vice chairperson for women in the panchayats at all levels, if the chair person elected was not a woman (Bhargava and Samal 1998, 2001; Jena 1995; Mishra 1998; Mishra et al. 1996). Finally in the year 1994, The Orissa Panchayati Raj Acts were amended to bring them into conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993; and the state government passed three new (Amendment) Acts, that is, Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994; Orissa Panchayat Samiti (Amendment) Act, 1994 and Orissa Zilla Parishad (Amendment) Act, 1994, which came into force from April 1994.

Political Representation, Inclusion and Empowerment: Theoretical Understanding

Empowerment has been a contested concept, and used in different contexts to denote different kinds of social and psychological changes.[1] In its much wider connotation, the concept has been defined as 'the expansion of people's capabilities and choices, the ability to exercise choice based on freedom from hunger, want and deprivation; and the opportunity to participate in, or endorse, decisions that affect their lives' (UNDP 1997: 8). The idea of empowerment is invoked in many contexts like human rights, economic insecurity, disadvantaged groups and about their capacity buildings, and also in addressing the problems of rights (Beteille 1999: 591). Empowerment involves two important aspects: developing the capabilities, negotiating skills and the ability of people on the one hand; and obtaining authority to make decisions or participate in decision making on affairs that affect their lives on the other. Beresford and Coft, therefore, define empowerment as 'making it possible for people to exercise power and have more control over their lives. That means having a greater voice in institutions, agencies and situations which affect them' (1993: 50).

Notwithstanding the various approaches and meanings of the term empowerment, it is essentially related to the sociological notion of 'power', and challenges the conditions of powerlessness and the skewed distribution of power relations in

a society. In sociological literature on the concept, we may broadly identify two ways of delineating the meaning of the concept of power. The dominant perspective following scholars like Max Weber (1978) and Robert Dahl (1957) associates power with domination and coercion. Such an explanation situates power in a social relation, where one individual exercises power over the other by virtue of his/her monopoly of resources which accrue power. In contrast to this view, which regards power as 'power over someone', the second view emphasises on understanding power as 'power to do something' (see Dowding 1996 and Goehler 2000). This view of power does not necessarily entails social relation of power between individuals, rather highlights capabilities or capacities of individuals or groups to produce outcomes of their choice without entering into a structured interaction. Empowerment as a concept comes close to this second notion of power, where it extends power to individuals or groups to enhance their capacities, capabilities and choices to produce outcomes on matters affecting their life. Conceptualised in such a manner, empowerment of an individual, group or community may help in redistribution of unequal power relations within and between families/societies. Empowerment, thus, aims at social equality which can be achieved through disempowering the social structures, systems and institutions which perpetuates unequal power relations (Sharma 1992: 28). Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces which marginalise women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. It is also visualised as an enabling process for disadvantaged sections (Ibid. 29).

Empowerment necessarily demands political inclusion in the institutions of decision-making and a change in the existing power relations, where certain sections of society remain outside the decision-making arena due to their specific historical socio-cultural experiences. In a democratic political structure, empowerment, therefore, entails proper and effective representation in the institutions of governance, so that through these representatives, people can voice their concerns and participate in making decisions on matters that affect their lives (Spicker 1994).

Empowerment and political inclusion through representation are essentially related. Notwithstanding the various approaches and meanings of empowerment, it can be commonly agreed that representation and political presence of marginalised and hitherto excluded groups in the institutions of governance will provide them with substantial power to change the rules of the game and also to negotiate the power relations with the privileged sections of society. Apparently, oppressed groups ranging from unorganised workers, poor peasants, tribal people, dalits and women in their struggle for power, envisage empowerment as objectives of economic development and social justice in the democratic process (Mohanty 1995: 1434). Further, political presence of excluded groups like STs is supposed to lead to a transformation of politics and challenge the structural barriers that have historically marginalised tribes in politics, society and economy. Political empowerment is also regarded as political incorporation (inclusion), meaning the extent to which a group has achieved significant representation and influence in political decision-making (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Browning et al. 1984; Mohanty 1995;

Singha Roy 1995). According to Bobo and Gilliam, 'political empowerment should increase participation because of its effects on several socio-psychological factors, in particular, its impact on levels of political trust, efficacy, and knowledge about politics' (1990: 379). While discussing about black empowerment they hypothesised that blacks in high empowerment areas should feel more trusting of government, express higher levels of efficacy and become more knowledgeable about politics than blacks in low empowerment areas. All of which should, in turn, contribute to higher levels of participation.

Understanding Representation

Representation is taken to mean 'a relation between two persons, the representative and the represented or constituent, with the representative holding the authority to perform various actions that incorporate the agreements of the represented' (Grazia 1968: 461). Viewed in this sense, the authority that the representatives enjoy is always derived from the agreement of the constituents, which they bestow upon the representatives to act or make decisions on their behalf. The role of representation is multi-faceted. Edmund Burke (1774) considered the role of the representative as 'one who ought to respect his constituents' opinions, who ought to prefer their interest above his own, but who ought not to sacrifice his unbiased opinion in deciding for the good of the whole nation' (cited in Rao 1998: 30).

The functions of representatives have been further elaborated by Whalke et al. (1962), who distinguish between three typical styles of representation, that is, 'delegates', 'trustees' and 'politicos'. The role of delegate is based on the assumption that representatives should not use their independent judgement or convictions as criteria of decision-making. The trustee role finds expression in two major conceptions: a moralistic conception, in which the representative is a free agent and follows what he considers right or just and a rational conception according to which the representative follows his own judgement based on an assessment of facts and on his understanding of the problems involved. Finally, the politico as a representational role type is disposed to both trustee and delegate roles in various ways, in that he is more sensitive to conflicting alternatives in role assumptions, and is more flexible in adopting a style that is suited to his decision-making. Representation should thus be seen as a continuum of styles, with the trustee and delegate orientations as poles, and a mid-point where the orientations tend to overlap and within a range give rise to a politico role (Rao 1998: 31).

Two Strands of Representation

The literature concerning political representation and empowerment points towards two central strands of representation: substantive representation and descriptive representation. Substantive representation emphasises the issues, ideas

and programmes to be represented, and the representative may not necessarily be one from the community which she/he is supposed to represent. Substantial representation is based on the premise that representatives are supposed to act on behalf of the constituents, and too much emphasis on who is present may divert the issue from the more urgent question of what the representatives do. For substantive representation, it is the activities of the representatives, rather than their characteristics, which matters. Delineating the true meaning of substantive representation, Pitkin (1967: 209) mentions, 'representing means acting in the interests of the represented (constituents), in a manner responsive to them'. She further adds that, 'representatives may and almost certainly will differ from those they act for, not only in their social and sexual characteristics but also in their understanding of where the true interests of their constituents lie. Fair representation cannot be guaranteed in advance (by choosing one from the same group), but it is achieved in more continuous process, which depends on a level of responsiveness to the electorate' (Pitkin 1967).

Substantive representation is highly valued in modern liberal representative democracy, where political parties and party ideologies provide the basis for such a form of representation. However, one can think of a reformist version of Pitkin's conceptions of substantive representation, which allows too much of independence of judgement and action to the representatives. Anne Phillips (1998: 227) argues that 'the shift from direct to representative democracy has shifted the emphasis from who the politicians are to what policies, preferences and ideas they represent, and in doing so, has made accountability to the electorate a pre-eminent concern, which minimises the significance of individuals elected'. In this reformist version of substantive representation, the quality of representation depends upon tighter mechanisms of accountability that bind politicians more closely to the opinions they profess to represent. To argue in a broader framework, substantive representation in a democratic set-up manifests itself in three dimensions: through activities or participation of representatives of taking real decision on their behalf, responsiveness of the representatives towards the interests of the constituents and the mechanism of accountability, which puts checks and balances on independent judgement and action of representatives.

In contrast to substantive representation, descriptive representation emphasises 'who represents' rather than 'what policies or ideas the representative is representing'. In this form of representation, the representative is supposed to belong to the group she/he represents and should share the same life experiences.[2] In descriptive representation, 'representatives are in their own persons and lives in some sense typically of the larger class of persons whom they represent' (Birch 1993: 72). It is said that descriptive representation can denote not only visible characteristics such as colour of skin, ethnicity or gender but also shared experiences (Mansbridge 1999).

The wider acceptance and popularity of substantive representation in the modern liberal representative democracy notwithstanding, several scholars have pointed towards descriptive representation as a means for empowerment of disadvantaged,

marginalised and otherwise excluded groups. Jane Mansbridge argues that at least in four contexts for four different reasons the disadvantaged groups may want to be represented by descriptive representation: adequate communication in contexts of mistrust; innovative thinking in the context of un-crystallised, not fully articulated, interests; creating a social meaning of ability to rule for the members in a historical context, where that ability has been seriously questioned; and increasing the polity's de facto legitimacy in the context of past discrimination (1999: 628). In other words, in the context of group mistrust, uncrystallised interests, a history suggesting inability to rule and low *de facto* legitimacy, descriptive representation enhances substantive representation by ensuring inclusion of disadvantaged and powerless groups, improving the quality of deliberation, and would in turn, ensure the empowerment of these groups.

Scholars working on (political) empowerment suggest that descriptive representation has positive effects on minority citizens. They argue that visible political leadership by members of a minority group would enhance trust in government, efficacy, group pride and participation (Gurin et al. 1989; Tete 1991). In a similar manner, Bobo and Gilliam (1990), from their study of black minority empowerment in the USA, suggest that minority citizens can become empowered after they have achieved significant descriptive representation, and influence in political decision-making. They further argue that minority empowerment is associated with greater participation, and descriptive representation would influence and enhance participation, since having a representative from their own group will encourage the minorities to feel that participation has an intrinsic value (Bobo and Gilliam 1990: 387). In another context, Banducci, Donovan and Karp (2004) from their cross-national study of minority representation, empowerment and participation in USA and New Zealand support similar argument that descriptive representation definitely matter in empowerment of marginalised (minority) groups. Their study concludes that descriptive representation in USA increased knowledge about and contact with representatives; and in New Zealand, it led to more positive evaluation of government responsiveness and increased electoral participation (Banducci et al. 2004).

Perhaps the most influential argument in favour of descriptive representation is that of Anne Phillips' (1995) seminal work *The Politics of Presence*, which makes a strong case for political presence of women in institutions of decision-making. Phillips feels that even the reformist argument of substantive representation—where the emphasis on accountability mechanism minimises the importance of who the representatives might be—'do not engage sufficiently with a widely felt sense of political exclusion by groups defined by their gender or ethnicity or race' (1995: 5). Phillips problematises the current engagement with democracy as an argument revolving around what we might call demands for political presence: demand for equal representation of women with men, demand for more even-handed balance between different ethnic groups that make up each society, demands for political inclusion of groups that have come to see themselves as marginalised or silenced or excluded.

Central to the thesis of 'Politics of Presence' is notions of difference. Diversity and difference are notions, which are not completely new to democratic politics. In fact, the defining characteristics of liberal democracy are grounded in heterogeneity of the societies. It was diversity of the citizenry, as much as its absolute size, that made the earlier consensual practices of Athenian direct and participatory democracy so inappropriate to the modern world (Phillips 1995). However, the difference, which liberal democratic tradition points to, mostly corresponds to diversity of beliefs, opinions, preferences and goals, all of which may stem from differences in experiences, but are considered in principle detachable from them. Such a conceptualisation of difference have largely discounted political presence of excluded groups, for when difference is considered in terms of diversity of opinions and ideas, it does not much matter who represents these ideas or opinions (Phillips 1995). In contrast to this, Phillips' Politics of Presence conceives difference in relation to experiences and identities based on gender, ethnicity or race, which may accordingly constitute different and distinct groups. Once difference is conceived in this manner, it may not, therefore, be possible to meet the demands for political inclusion without also including members from these groups. As Phillips rightly points out, '...men may conceivably stand in for women when what is at issue is the representation of agreed policies or programmes or ideas. But how can men legitimately stand in for women when what is at issue is representation of women per se' (Phillips 1995: 6).

In another context, Phillips presents three intrinsic benefits of Politics of Presence: appealing to principles of justice, identifying particular interests of the group, and a more revitalised democracy (Phillips 1991). It is quite convincing to expect the positions of political influence to be randomly distributed between both sexes and across all ethnic groups that make up the society. And any distorted distribution of political office—with absence of certain group—is evidence of injustice and intentional or structural discrimination (Phillips 1991: 229). Posing her argument from a feminist perspective, Phillips states that 'there are particular needs, interests and concerns that arise from women's experiences, and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics dominated by men. Equal rights to vote have not proved strong enough to deal with this problem, there must also be equality among those elected to office' (Phillips 1991: 233).

The basic arguments of the notion of Politics of Presence rests on three premises: that disadvantaged and excluded groups based on gender, ethnicity and race have a distinct and separate interest, that this interest cannot be adequately represented by members other than their own group/community, and that the election of a members from their own group ensures their representation. Further, the argument for political presence of excluded groups stresses that it would unleash the true meaning of democracy by ensuring and enhancing wider participation and public deliberation. Phillips had a strong conviction that changing the composition of elected assemblies—through inclusion of excluded groups by means of assured representation—is a part of a wider project of increasing and enhancing democracy.

Anne Phillips developed her arguments of political presence within the broader framework of feminist politics, and was more concerned for gender equality and political inclusion of women in institutions of decision-making. However, the argument can equally be extended to other marginalised and disadvantaged ethnic and racial groups, where the pre-existing socio-economic exclusion of these groups is reproduced and replicated in the form of political under-representation. In such a context of marginalisation and exclusion, political presence turns out to be a deliberate intervention, which is necessary to break the link between social structure of inequality or exclusion and the political reflection of these in levels of participation and influence.

Data and Method

The article is based on personal interviews with 173 elected representatives of PRIs in the Dhenkanal district of the state of Orissa in India. Several reasons prompt us to choose the state of Orissa and the Dhenkanal district as sites of empirical investigation. Since the main problem of the research revolved around the issue of ST representation and participation in decentralised local governments, the state of Orissa and the Dhenkanal district best suited for the purpose. The ST population constitute 22.1 per cent of the total population of the state, and 9.7 per cent of the total tribal population of the country. Out of the total 701 communities identified as STs in the Indian Constitution, 62 are from the state of Orissa. Out of these 62 tribal groups, 13 are recognised as Primitive Tribal Groups. Further, nearly half of Orissa's land (44.7 per cent) is under Schedule V of the Indian Constitution, with a tribal concentration of 68 per cent.

Out of the 30 districts of the state of Orissa, the Dhenkanal district is chosen for the purpose of empirical work. Dhenkanal is land-locked district located in the central part of the state of Orissa, consisting of two ex-princely states, that is, Dhenkanal and Hindol. The Dhenkanal district lies between 20º29' to 21º26' North latitude, and between 85º7' to 86º12' East longitude. The district is bounded on the north by Kendujhar district and in the south by Nayagarh district. In the east lies Jajapur district and in the west Anugul district. The area of the district is 4452 sq km, which is 2.86 per cent of the total area of the state occupying 15th rank among the 30 districts of the state. The heterogeneous social composition of the district with a significant presence of ST and Scheduled Caste population prompted us to take the district for empirical investigation. The STs constitute a sizeable proportion of the population of the district, consisting of 12.79 per cent of the total population of the district, which is higher than the national average. *Shabara, Saora* and *Munda* are the three most populous tribal groups of the district consisting of 28.35, 14.42 and 12.53 per cent of the total tribal population of the district, respectively.

The Panchayati Raj structure of the Dhenkanal district consists of one Zilla Parishad (at the district level), eight Panchayat Samitis (PS) (at the Block level) and 172 Gram Panchayats (GP) (at the village level). For the purpose of empirical

work, two PS, that is, Dhenkanal Sadar and Parjang were identified from the Dhenkanal Zilla Parishad; and from each PS, four GP were chosen. The GP were selected from the two chosen PS based on the criterion that these panchayats should have (1) a president who is Scheduled Caste male from a SC reserved constituency, (2) a president who is a ST male from a ST reserved constituency, (3) a president who is a woman from a constituency reserved for women and (4) a general category male president from an unreserved constituency. Thus, in total the data constituted all the elected representatives of the Dhenkanal ZP, Dhenkanal Sadar and Parjang PS, and the representatives from eight GPs chosen from the two mentioned PS. The empirical data were collected from representatives of all three tiers of PRIs.[3] Along with interview, Focused Group Discussions were also conducted to get deeper insights into functioning of the PRIs. Table 1 elaborates the fieldwork sites and the data, and provides details of the ZP, PS and GPs chosen for fieldwork and their number of elected representatives.

Since the main focus of the article is to study the representation and empowerment of STs, it is apt to clearly distinguish the social background of the respondents. Out of the total 173 elected representatives selected for interview, 18 were STs and 39 were Scheduled Castes, and the remaining 116 were from general caste categories. These general caste category included representatives from land owning dominant castes of Orissa such as Karana and Khandayat, as well as from several other backward caste groups. It was also revealed that the ST representation at the ZP level was more than proportionate to their percentage of population in the district. While the STs constitute 12.79 per cent of the districts' population, the percentage of ST representation at the Dhenkanal ZP was observed to be 14.3 (three out of 21 representatives). Further, out of the 173 representatives, 106 (61.3 per cent) were male and 67 (38.7 per cent) were female. It was observed that the representation of women was more than the number of seats reserved for them at all the three tiers. It was interesting to note that at the GP level, almost 40 per cent

Table 1. Details of Selected PRIs and Number of Elected Representatives

Zilla Parishad (ZP)	No. of Elected Representatives	Panchayat Samiti (PS)	No. of Elected Representatives	Gram Panchayat (GP)	No. of Elected Representatives
Dhenkanal	21	Dhenkanal Sadar	24	Gengutia	15
				Tarava	16
				Nagiapasi	12
				Baladiabandh	15
		Parjang	25	Pitini	11
				Basoi	10
				Lodhani	12
				Basulei	12
Sub Total	21		49		103
Total			173		

were women representatives, while the number of seats reserved for them is 33 per cent. Such an observation reveals the fact of women coming to PRIs even from general seats.

An inquiry into the age structure of the representatives reveals that relatively higher percentage (36.4 per cent) of representatives belonged to the age group of 31–40. A difference was observed between the ZP and PS/GP with respect to age distribution of the representatives. While at the ZP level only two representatives (9.5 per cent) were under 30 years of age, at the PS and GP level their percentage was 32.7 and 26.2, respectively. Such an observation indicates to emergence of young generation leaders at the grassroots level such as GP and PS in contrast to ZP. The educational status of the representatives also indicates a differential situation between ZP and GP level. While 28 per cent of the representatives at the ZP level were graduates, at the GP level presence of such graduate representatives was very meagre with 5.8 per cent only. Likewise, there were 10 representatives (9.7 per cent) at the GP level who were illiterate, whereas there were no illiterates at the ZP level. The social background and personal profile of the respondents as well as their bifurcation into the three tiers of the PRIs is elaborated in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Background of Respondents

Level of PRI/Socio-economic Indicators		ZP	PS	GP
Caste	ST	3	4	11
	SC	5	12	22
	General Caste	13	33	70
Age	Under 30	2	16	27
	31–40	12	16	63
	41–50	3	10	38
	51–60	3	3	15
	Above 60	1	4	12
Sex	Female	7	19	41
	Male	14	30	62
Occupation	Farming	12	12	34
	Wage Labour	0	1	21
	Business	4	8	16
	Contractor	0	1	2
	Politician	5	2	0
	Others	0	23	30
Education	Illiterate	0	3	10
	Primary	0	6	36
	Upper Primary	0	6	15
	High School	8	17	25
	Intermediate	5	10	11
	Graduate	6	5	6
	Above Graduate	2	2	0

Representation, Inclusion and Empowerment of Tribes through Panchayats

This section focuses upon the issue of tribal empowerment through inclusion and representation in PRIs based upon the analysis of the empirical data from the field. The theoretical review carried out in the previous section suggests us that political inclusion and assured representation (through the system of seat reservation) are two most important factors for empowerment of marginalised and excluded groups. We considered this theoretical assumption as a working hypothesis and attempted to assess the tribal empowerment through inclusive representation. Taking clue from the theoretical review, we tried to investigate both substantive and descriptive representation of the tribal elected members in the three tiers of PRIs, and then to examine the influence of this inclusive representation upon their empowerment. The issue of substantive representation and its impact on empowerment is judged through an investigation of the action of the representative or the way in which they participate in the functioning of the panchayat. Similarly, descriptive representation is empirically examined by looking into its three fundamental aspects: representation of group-specific interest, construction of social meaning for the excluded groups like STs and establishment of de facto legitimacy at PRIs.

Substantive Representation in the PRIs

Awareness about the policies, programmes and functioning of PRIs as well as participating in the PRI activities are, in fact, the manifestation of substantive representation. Broadly, one can identify two ways of assessing the level of participation of elected representatives in the panchayats. The first is through an examination of activities in the panchayat meetings and in different committees of the panchayat to take decisions about various activities for the overall development of the GP and the second is through investigating their overall involvement in political affairs and public life of the locality. It is essential to highlight at this point that participation of the elected representatives also involves continuous interaction with their constituents, which allows them to gauge the interests and needs of the constituents and work towards meeting them.

The theoretical review of substantive representation mentioned about representation of certain ideas on behalf of the constituents, and working towards these ideas for the overall welfare of the constituency. Representing ideas on behalf of the constituents and working towards them for welfare of constituency necessarily requires awareness about different programmes and policies of the institution. We therefore, attempted to assess the level of awareness of ST representatives on goal and objectives of PRIs and about developmental schemes, which are beneficial to their specific group as well as to the whole constituency. Table 3 shows that the level of awareness of representatives is quite high about the objective and various developmental schemes implemented by PRIs. Even though there is a

minor difference among ST and general caste representatives with respect to the level of awareness, the result, however, shows that the ST representatives possess significant awareness about the PRIs (see Table 3). When asked about the different schemes being implemented by the PRIs for the overall development of the constituency, the tribal representatives across gender were able to articulate about them in detail.

Table 3. Level of Awareness of Elected Representatives

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

Measures of Awareness	ST	General Caste
Awareness about purposes/objectives of PRIs	88.9	99.1
Awareness about developmental schemes implemented by PRIs	72.2	92.1

Since we considered participation as an essential element of substantive representation, an attempt was made to gauge the level of participation of ST representatives in order to understand ST representation in local governance institutions, which has a bearing upon the empowerment of the community as a whole. Participation of the representatives was examined by way of looking their involvement in political activities both inside and outside the PRIs. The data presented in Tables 4 and 5 reveal lower rates of participation for ST representatives. Of the nine measures that were identified to gauge the participation of the representatives both inside and outside the PRIs, eight show that STs are less active in political participation than general caste representatives.

Table 4. Participation in Local Political Activities outside PRIs

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

	ST	General Caste
Participation in election activities of the locality	34.4	52.2
Participation in campaigning for political leaders in the general elections	33.3	57.9
Participation in political meetings in the locality	35.6	55.2
Participation in non-political (cultural/social/conflict resolution, etc.) meetings of the locality	83.3	76.7

Participation of the representatives outside the PRIs was gauged by way of examining their involvement in general election activities, campaigning for political leaders and political meetings held in the locality. We also tried to assess the

Table 5. Participation in Panchayat Activities (Inside PRIs)

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

	ST	General Caste
Attendance in regular PRI meetings	66.7	91.4
Raising problems of locality in Panchayat meetings	70.6	77.8
Participation in discussions held during meetings	52.9	81.6
Participation in making decisions about planning and budgeting	14.6	17.0
Participation in making decision about location of projects and developmental works	11.8	14.9

involvement of the representatives in the general public life including socio-cultural activities and conflict resolution meetings. It was revealed from the empirical data that except for participation in non-political activities of the locality, participation of ST representatives in local political activities was observed to be extremely low. In terms of participation in local socio-cultural activities or participation in conflict resolution measures, ST representatives scored higher than the general caste representatives. This is owing to the fact that Tribes in general maintain their own and independent socio-cultural organisations, and the tribal leaders play a significant role in resolving any conflicts arising within the community. Besides participation in public life, which again is confined to their own community, tribal representatives' participation was much less in activities during the general elections of the locality, campaigning for political leaders and also in attending political meetings of the locality (see Table 4).

In contrast to the participation of ST representatives in political activities outside PRIs, an observation of the measures of their participation inside PRIs may reveal relative higher rate of involvement of ST representatives(see row 2 of Tables 4 and 5). This implies that the ST representatives have failed in creating a space for themselves in the local political arena, and their involvement is only confined to the PRI institutions, to which they are elected through the system of reservation of seats. Lower command and control of ST representatives in outside political activities of the locality indicates negatively towards the overall empowerment of the tribal community. In a situation, where tribal leaders themselves have limited space in local politics, to what extent one can expect reflections of tribal concerns in the absence of a tribal leader in these local politics is an issue to ponder over.

Participation in the everyday activities of the governing process of ST representatives at all the three tiers of PRIs was observed to be relatively high. Activities such as attending meetings regularly, raising issues of their localities and participating in the various discussions held during the meetings are found to be significantly high at all the three tiers of the PRIs. However, relatively higher percentage

of participation was also observed for general caste representatives in political activities of both inside and outside PRIs. The results also illuminate the differences among STs and general caste representatives in participation with respect to decision-making for planning, budgeting and location of developmental projects. This is because these are the major decisions of PRIs upon which ST representatives have less control.

It is interesting to note that not only ST representatives had minimal score with respect to measures of participation concerning decision-making in the PRIs but their general caste counterparts also exhibited minimal scores in these measures of participation (see rows 4 and 5 of Table 5). Both the ST and general caste representatives had higher rates of participation in attending meetings and raising and discussing problems of locality in the meetings. But when it came to making actual decision about the PRIs, the representatives irrespective of their social background had extremely low level of participation. Similar observations were also drawn up by Behar and Kumar (2002) in their study of PRIs in Madhya Pradesh. Such an observation indicates dominance, influence and control of individuals who are outside the panchayat structure other than the elected representatives in PRI activities.

Descriptive Representation in the PRIs

For the purpose of analysis, we defined descriptive representation as a case of 'mirror representation', where the representatives are in their own persons, and lives in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent. The analysis here is based on Jane Mansbridge's (1999) theory of 'descriptive representation', where examples of black legislators representing the black constituents and women legislators representing the women constituents are given. Mansbridge (1999) mentions that beyond substantive representation, descriptive representation benefits the representative in constructing a social meaning and upholding a de facto legitimacy. Adequate communication and articulation of group-specific interests are identified as the major tools of descriptive representation, which enhance the quality of deliberation in democracy. As pointed out earlier, we made an attempt to gauge the descriptive representation of STs through an examination of three fundamental issues: representation of group-specific interest, construction of social meaning of the excluded group and upholding de facto legitimacy at PRIs.

Representation of Group-Specific Interest

One of the essential beliefs in descriptive representation is that it will cater to the needs and interests of the concerned group, since the representatives belong to that particular group, and possess the lived experiences of the group. In descriptive representation, the representatives can manage to represent the group-specific

interest in the best possible way, as they are expected to communicate adequately with their constituents, and are in a position to articulate the interests of the constituents. Further, the constituents also tend to communicate with their representatives in a more frequent manner as both the representative and the constituents belong to the same group. Descriptive representation further assures that the enhanced communication between the representatives and the constituents would lead a more responsive and accountable government. To analyse the aspects of representation of group-specific interests of STs in PRIs, we examined the responsiveness and accountability of ST representatives, and their efforts to voice the group-specific interests and concerns in the PRIs. We considered responsiveness towards group-specific interests, answerability and accountability as outcomes of enhanced communication between the representatives and the constituents, which work towards ensuring improved deliberative democracy.

PRIs, as a forum of local government, provide ample scope for communication between representatives and the constituents through Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas, which creates opportunities for the elected representatives to be responsive towards constituents' needs and be accountable towards them. Of the five indicators identified to assess the responsiveness of the representatives, at least three indicators point towards higher rate of responsiveness on the part of ST representatives (see rows 1, 2 and 3 of Table 6). Substantially higher percentage (83.3 per cent) of ST representatives opined that they are answerable to their constituents as their representatives. The enhanced communication between the representatives and the constituents become evident from the fact that nearly two-thirds (61.5 per cent) of the ST representatives opined about frequent communication with their constituents, and more than three-fourths (77.8 per cent) ST representatives stated that the constituents inquire about their work as representatives in PRIs. However, when compared with their general caste counterparts, the ST representatives exhibited lesser degree of responsiveness than the general caste representatives.

Table 6. Responsiveness of Elected Representatives

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

	ST	General Caste
Are you answerable to anyone as representatives?	83.3	93.1
Do you interact with members of your constituency regularly?	61.5	70.7
Do people of your constituency ask you about your work as a representative?	77.8	90.5
Do you take into consideration the needs and interests of people while implementing developmental schemes?	38.9	50.9
Is there any compulsion about your reporting to the constituents	16.7	5.2

Data on accountability of the elected representatives, as depicted in Table 7, reveal that a substantial higher percentage (77.8 per cent) of ST representatives opined that members should be accountable to the constituent. Only a minimal proportion of ST representatives stated that representatives should be accountable to no one else or should be accountable to outsiders such as local elites, bureaucracy and/or local MLA and MPs. Majority of the ST representatives believed in the accountability of all the elected representatives, rather than only president or vice president of the PRIs. Only a minimal (38.9 per cent) of the ST representatives believed in the idea of only the president and vice president being accountable to the public. Further, half of the ST representatives believed that Gram Sabhas should be conducted more frequently for easy communication and articulation of interests by the representatives. However, when compared with the general caste representatives, the ST representatives exhibited a relatively lesser degree of accountability.

Table 7. Perceptions of Elected Representatives on Accountability

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

	ST	General Caste
Members are accountable to public	77.8	84.5
Members are accountable to bureaucracy	16.7	8.6
Members need not be accountable to anyone	11.1	7.8
Members are accountable to village elites	16.7	6.0
Members are accountable to MLAs/MPs	11.1	6.0
Members are accountable to the president and vice president	50.0	67.2
Only president and vice president should be held accountable	38.9	14.7
Gram Sabhas should be conducted more frequently to account for their activities	50.0	55.2

The third and most important indicator identified to analyse the representation of group-specific interest is that of the efforts of the ST representatives towards voicing matters of their own concern in PRIs. To gauge the efforts of the ST representatives in voicing matters that concern their group, we posed them with the question regarding their attempts to voice their group-specific concerns in the PRIs. Data depicted in Table 8 indicate that two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of the ST representatives opined to have identified concerns and issues specific to their tribal community, and taken up those group-specific issues in PRIs. These ST representatives were successful in identifying issues interests and concerns of their own tribal community, which they would like to address through PRIs.

Issues such as assistance to children for education, providing healthcare to STs, implementation of several developmental programmes to improve their livelihood options, land and housing facilities for tribal community members, rights over produces from forest and other common lands, etc. were identified as group-specific interests of the tribal communities, which the ST representatives would like to address. Similarly, a higher percentage of ST representatives (66.7 per cent) also opined that their fellow tribal community members bring to them their group-specific problems, and only a minimal 33.3 per cent of the representatives stated that their tribal constituents go to other members of the PRIs for addressing their concern (see Table 8). Similar observations are also made in studies of descriptive representation among African–American of USA by Claudine Gay (2001), who mentioned that African–American constituents in districts represented by African–American legislators, are more likely to contact their representatives, than in contrast to African–American constituents represented by White legislatures.

Table 8. Representation of Group-Specific Interest by ST Representatives

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST)]

	YES
Do you take up any issue in ZP/PS/GP which is specific to your group?	66.7
Do your group members bring to you any group-specific problems?	66.7
Do they take the group-specific problems to other representatives?	33.3
Are you expected by the electorate of your group to give more importance to group-specific problems?	72.2
Is it possible that other representatives too could be sensitive to your group-specific problems?	33.3
Do you think that the problems concerning SC/ST can be solved in a better way only by a SC/ST representative?	66.7
Does your selection as a member to the ZP/PS/GP has an impact on articulation of your group-specific problems?	54.4
Is reservation an important factor for your selection to the ZP/PS/GP?	100.0

Descriptive representation believes that representatives can represent the group-specific problem in a better way, since they share the same lived experiences and have easy and enhanced communication with the constituents. The findings of our study confirm such an assumption about descriptive representation (see Table 8). A significant majority of the ST representatives (72.2 per cent) stated that members of the tribal community expect their fellow tribal representatives to give more importance to group-specific problems. Further, only one-third of the ST representatives (33.3 per cent) believed that representatives other than their own group can be sensitive to their group-specific interests. Similarly,

two-thirds of the ST representatives (66.7 per cent) believed that problems concerning ST/SC can be solved in a more efficient way only with ST/SC representatives. During the course of personal interview and focused group discussion with the tribal representatives, the point that was time and again repeated by the ST representatives was that how can the general caste and non-ST representatives understand and solve the problem of the STs, when they do not share and live with these problems. It was further stressed that the mutual and shared experiences of subordination and exclusion build the base for bonds of trust between STs and their representatives.

Construction of Social Meaning of Grassroots Democracy

Inclusion of ST members to institutions of local governance through affirmative action has constructed a new meaning for grassroots democracy in general and for the identity of the tribal community in particular. Tribal communities, who otherwise historically face marginalisation and exclusion, have got an opportunity to be a part of local decision-making. Even though liberal democracy provides equal rights to all, these equal rights certainly mean differently to different communities. A simple right of political participation may not ensure participation of STs, who suffer from historical exclusion and marginalisation, and live a political life, which entails some form of 'second-class citizenship' (see Mansbridge 1999).

The empirical data confirm that descriptive representation through the system of seat reservation has given a new meaning to tribal identity and has made it possible for representation of such identity in the local governance institutions. Being members of PRIs has given a new kind of confidence to the tribal representatives, who otherwise were characterised as illiterate, unaware, passive and unfit to rule. This has deconstructed the dominant political idea, which has much prevailed in rural political arena that persons/groups with these characteristics 'do not rule', 'are not able to rule' and 'are unfit to rule'. To understand the new found confidence of the tribal representatives and representation of tribal identity in the PRIs we tried to assess and compare their prior political experience with their current political interests and aspirations (see Table 9). The results depicted in Table 9 highlight lower political base and experience for ST representatives before entering to the institutions of panchayats. Even such prior experience and political base are also observed to be low among the general caste representatives, albeit relatively higher than that of ST representatives. Slightly higher than one-fourth (27.8 per cent) of the ST representatives opined that they contested the PRI elections out of their own interest, a point, which indicates persuasion, influence and request of other individuals behind contesting election of these representatives. However, if we look at their present political interest and future aspirations as opposed to their past experience, there is some positive sign of emergence of Scheduled Tribal leadership in rural political scenario, which otherwise had excluded them

Table 9. Level of Interest and Aspiration in Politics of Elected Representatives

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

Measures of Political Interest and Aspiration	ST	General Caste
Prior political base	11.8	29.8
Prior political experience	16.7	21.1
Contested election out of own interest	27.8	49.1
Interest in politics before contesting this Panchayat election	44.4	51.7
Member of any political party (at present)	55.6	71.9
Aspirations for contesting next election	55.6	64.7
Aspirations for future political career	44.4	51.7
Aspirations for involvement in party activity	44.4	71.5

from positions of leadership. Table 9 reveals that majority (55.6 per cent) of ST representatives are now members of some or the other political party, and an equal proportion of ST representatives aspire to context next panchayat election. Even a relatively higher proportion of ST representatives (44.4 per cent) aspire for future political career and continued involvement in party activities.

All these positive figures talk about a new social meaning and consciousness for the STs in general and emergence of a new tribal political identity, which is now all set to be reflected in the rural political institutions. This newly emerged identity has also given a new meaning to the institution of PRIs itself. Institutions of local governance are now no longer a forum, constituted only by members of upper caste as it used to be. The political presence of STs through descriptive representation has given a diversified meaning to the institution, which now represents multiple identities and interests.

Upholding de facto Legitimacy

The descriptive representation of STs through policies of affirmative action has increased the legitimacy of the PRIs. Since democracy derives its essence from involvement of people in matters of decision-making, such efforts of inclusion of Tribal community members in institutions of decision-making necessarily work towards gaining inclusiveness and legitimacy. Such representation proves the point that local democracy is not just a government for the Tribal community members but also a government of them, and more particularly a government by themselves. In other words, a political institution which does not reflect the presence of various social groups of the society would hardly qualify to be called a legitimate one.

Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to bring back the original question as to whether representation—substantive as well as descriptive—ensured empowerment of the STs. In principle, descriptive representation by way of ensuring political presence of Tribal representatives should work towards their empowerment. However, the empirical findings suggested otherwise. Empowerment, as the concept itself suggests, entails some amount of power. In sociological literature on the concept, we may broadly identify two ways of delineating the meaning of the concept of power. The dominant perspective following scholars like Max Weber (1978) and Robert Dahl (1957) associates power with domination and coercion. Such an explanation situates power in a social relation of power, where one individual exercises power over the other by virtue of his/her monopoly of resources which accrue power. In contrast to this view, which regards power as 'power over someone', the second view emphasises on understanding power as 'power to do something' (see Dowding 1996 and Goehler 2000). This view of power does not necessarily entails social relation of power between individuals, rather highlights capabilities or capacities of individuals or groups to produce outcomes of their choice without entering into a structured interaction. Empowerment as a concept comes close to this second notion of power, where it extends power to individuals or groups to enhance their capacities, capabilities and choices to produce outcomes on matters affecting their life. To contextualise the concept at the level of PRIs, empowerment can be understood as increased capabilities and capacities of the representatives to make decisions, which matter for their constituents.

To analyse the concept of empowerment, we posed certain questions to the representatives to understand their capacity and capability to influence the outcomes of decision-making in the panchayat. We indicated several issues of decision-making and asked the representatives to opine whether they are powerful or powerless on those indicators. The higher scores of substantive and descriptive representation of tribal representatives would have led one to believe that tribal representatives would exhibit higher level of empowerment. However, almost all representatives across social backgrounds opined of feeling powerless on those matters of decision-making. A substantially higher percentage of ST representatives opined that they feel powerless in day-to-day functioning of the PRIs. Of the 12 indicators identified to study empowerment of ST representatives, except one, a significant percentage of representative stated to be powerless in all the indicators. Only in the case of getting relevant information from the officials, slightly less than half of the ST representatives (48.7 per cent) felt powerless (see Table 10).

Such high scores on powerlessness by ST representatives may lead one to conclude political inclusion through assured representation of ST members did not result in making them empowered in local government institutions. While the participation and involvement of tribal representatives in PRI activities were higher, they could not hold the actual powers of decision making in the PRIs. Such a mismatch between political presence in institutions of local governance

Table 10. Powerlessness of Elected Representatives

[All figures in percentages, N = 18 (ST), 116 (General Caste)]

Issues/Powerlessness	ST	General Caste
Prioritisation of issues	77.8	69
Selection of beneficiaries	71.8	65.5
Awarding contracts	89.7	83.6
Getting contracts (for yourself)	94.9	94
Getting relevant information from officials	48.7	48.3
Relations with members of higher tiers	53.8	44
Relations with MLAs of the area	74.4	67.2
Relations with local party leaders	61.5	59.5
Influencing activities in the constituency	79.5	81
Influencing other members	56.4	47.4
Influencing president	74.4	56.9
Generating resources for local works (constituency)	89.7	81.9

through inclusive representation and relatively higher political participation on the one hand, and the feeling of powerlessness and disempowerment of tribal representatives in matters relating to decision-making on the other, creates a rationale to deliberate the original question as to why representation could not ensure empowerment.

Distinguishing Representation from Empowerment/Participation

Following the enactment of affirmative action policies, which has progressively eradicated under-representation of marginalised groups like STs in institutions of local government, there has been a constant dilution of the very idea behind the concept of 'representation'. While the democratic reforms are in a position to answer the question as to 'who the representatives are?', they are still not clear about the question as to 'what the representatives do?'. Yogendra Yadav (2008) rightly points out 'political representation faces a paradox in contemporary India'. The practice of representative democracy has led to widening of the pool from which representatives are recruited, and a reduction in the mismatch between the social profile of the representatives and those who are represented. However, this deepening of representative democracy has coexisted, simultaneously with a weakening of the very idea of representation (Yadav 2008).

The apparent paradoxes between high representation and lack of empowerment/participation would become more clear if we perceive representation and empowerment as distinct entities having their challenges and opportunities at

different spears of activities (see also Jayal 2005). It is essential to understand that while the origin of the problem of lack of proper representation is more straightforward, and is necessarily linked with state policies, the origin of the problem of lack of participation is more complex, and is a result of multiple factors ranging from individual to societal. Lack of proper political representation of various groups constituting the population (i.e. SCs, STs and women) is an institutional inadequacy, which can be legislated through a progressive state intervention. Despite the inability of Indian parliamentarian democracy to legislate adequate representation of women at the national parliament and state legislatures, there had been effective laws in place to ensure proper representation for STs starting from local to national level. Therefore, ensuring effective representation requires a progressive state intervention in the form of quotas or seat reservations in different levels of political institutions. However, creating conditions for greater participation, thereby leading to empowerment, is infinitely more complex, which requires several hurdles to be crossed, and a whole gamut of exclusionary practices to be overcome. We may broadly identify three separate but inter-related barriers, such as **individual constraints, social barriers** and **institutional challenges**, which create hindrances to political participation, and thereby come in the way of empowerment of STs, despite higher representation in the local governance institutions. Corollary to this point is that any attempts towards empowerment must address these factors in order to ensure higher participation and quality involvement of STs in local governments, along with quantitatively higher representation.

Individual Constraints

Participation in public affairs requires leadership quality and a kind of personality, which requires being articulate, expressive, overt and lacking fear to speak in public. While some of these personality traits can be inculcated through personal efforts, socialisation process and one's place in social hierarchy often determine these qualities. In other words, individual constraints to participate is often created and perpetuated by the social system itself, where groups like STs always remain at the bottom of social hierarchy. It should be pointed out here that education and political awareness play a greater role in overcoming these individual constraints to participation. It was observed from the empirical findings that most of the ST representatives have tried their best to overcome these individual constraints. Having spent a considerable time (few representatives reported that it is their second term in panchayats) in panchayat politics, some of the tribal representatives have gained awareness about functioning of the panchayats, and have mastered the ability to speak in public. However, lack of education, submissive personality and inability to express oneself in public still remains as individual barriers to participation for ST members in general at a larger level.

Societal Barriers

While it was relatively easy for the ST representatives to overcome individual constraints, societal barriers were clearly hard to cross. The structural inequalities

of the Indian social system based on the principles of hierarchy can be identified as one of the important factors, which generate sufficient ground for deprivation and exclusion of STs from institutions of rural decision-making. It is worth reiterating that panchayats as formal institutions of political decision-making do not function independent of rural power structure, which still remains dominated by members of upper caste and class of rural society. The ingraining of the panchayats in the rural power structure, therefore, regenerates and replicates voicelessness and powerlessness for the STs in the formal political institutions of rural decision-making, and excludes them from matters of decision-making. In other words, the decisive dominance that the rural elites and other influential individuals belonging to upper caste and class enjoy in the rural power structure is now extended to the formal institutions of panchayats. The governance at the panchayat level has certainly reinforced rather than weakened the position of the powerful groups in villages. The empirical experience at the local level, therefore, suggests that the old network of patronage based on class, caste, gender and ethnicity is still prevalent denying real democratic empowerment of the deprived sections of society. Despite the decentralisation measures taken to empower the local bodies and subsequent amendments to privilege the participation of lower castes and disadvantageous communities, in practice these institutions are manipulated by the higher castes in rural India. Thus, in the absence of interventions to alter the power relations at the local level, institutional decentralisation has failed to bring about the real changes in the living conditions of certain sections of society resulting in their increasing marginalisation, disempowerment and powerlessness.

It, therefore, becomes essential to understand that attending meetings and involving oneself in panchayat activities may be regarded as instruments of greater democratisation, but successfully influencing and affecting the decision-making process depends upon one's position in the larger social structure, and is not necessarily related to one's position inside the panchayats. While the former are individual constraints, which are relatively easy to overcome by the ST representatives, the later pertained to social barriers, which are more or less imposed upon the representatives and are difficult to cross. As the empirical evidence suggests the substantive and descriptive representation have definitely given a new-found confidence and identity to tribal members to voluntarily involve themselves in panchayat activities, but had not changed their structural position in the larger social system, which still remains lower in the hierarchy. Although membership of the panchayats could be said to be representative in terms of caste, class and gender, the institutions of panchayat have in reality remained the preserve of the dominant groups. The findings of the study draw our attention to the fact that attempts towards political equality and empowerment through decentralised reforms may not yield the desired results without an equal and serious engagement with the questions of structural inequality. It is, therefore, important to create conducive structural conditions such as access, ownership and control over productive resources for the STs, which will help to increase

their participation in terms of affecting the decision-making process and in turn will work for their empowerment.

Institutional and Structural Challenges

The third factor, that we would like to highlight regarding the conditions of powerlessness of tribal representatives despite higher participation, points towards the failure of the institution of PRIs itself to devolve power to the local communities and make them part of local decision-making. Achieving proper representation in local government institutions was the first challenge faced by STs in an otherwise hierarchical social order. Having achieved that through affirmative action policies, there still remains a host of other procedural and institutional challenges that the tribal representatives encounter in the way in which the institution of decentralised governance actually work. In a seemingly rigid and hierarchical social structure, with its inbuilt systems of deprivation, voicelessness and powerlessness of the marginalised, decentralised reform is considered as the only hope for activating people's participation and the success of democracy. However, this requires genuine efforts to establish grassroots democracy with bottom–up approaches of governance. But in practice, as the empirical evidences suggest, panchayats are treated as a bureaucratic extension for implementation of various developmental services, through which state reinforces its top–down approach of development planning. It is important to point out that it was a general opinion among the representatives across social groups that the bureaucracy holds the real power and the officials manage to exercise power. Some of the ST representatives also pointed out the nexus between local elite, contractor and the bureaucratic officials in delivering developmental services in the panchayats. These representatives were just asked to be a part of discussions about implementation of these programmes, which are actually controlled by the upper caste local elite in collaboration with party political leaders and local bureaucratic officials. Affirmative action policies for the marginalised groups were expected to bring about a change in village power structures by engaging the participation of these groups in panchayat affairs. But in reality, the reformative policies have only brought about a token change in the participation of these groups.

We may, therefore, conclude that political representation and participation may form necessary conditions to bring STs into institutions of decision-making, but are not sufficient to empower them, especially in the absence of supportive structural transformation and enabling institutional arrangements. Besides, representation and participation leading to empowerment of marginalised communities like STs need to be viewed separately, since both correspond to overcoming constraints and challenges in separate spheres of activity. While a positive state intervention can solve the problem of under-representation, ensuring successful participation and thereby empowerment requires multi-layered actions by state institutions and civil society organisations. Internal mobilisation of the community and identity formation through assertive politics may contribute positively in this regard.

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Notes

1. For an understanding of various approaches to empowerment see Batliwala (1993), Bystydziensky (1992), Chandra (1997) Rowlands (1998), UNDP (1997) and Luttrell et al. (2009).
2. The term 'descriptive representation' was coined by Griffiths and Wollheim (1960) and was adopted by Hanna Pitkin in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation.* For details on descriptive representation, see Birch (1964, 1993), Mansbridge (1999) and Pitkin (1967).
3. Following the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, the PRIs under the decentralisation constitute a three-tier structure, i.e. *Zilla Parishad* at the district level, *Panchayat Samiti* at the intermediary or block level and *Gram Panchayat* at the village level.

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